

# GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S  
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INCLUDED IN THIS ISSUE

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Ashley Hibbard

**Romans 1—4**

Stephen Finamore

**Our creator God**

Ruth Bancewicz et al.

**James**

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**Life after death**

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**Advents of Christ**

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**'O Come, O Come,  
Emmanuel'**

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**Childhood**

Kate Bruce



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# The editors write...



Welcome to this issue of *Guidelines*! This is our first issue as editors, though we have been involved with *Guidelines* for a number of years, through our roles at BRF as Head of Content Creation (Olivia) and Editorial Manager (Rachel). We are grateful to Helen Paynter for her time as editor, which saw a number of new writers from different traditions join the *Guidelines* team. We hope to continue finding new talent and wisdom for this series, alongside our longstanding contributors.

We welcome two new contributors to this issue. Matthew Knell is a lecturer at London School of Theology and gives us one of our Advent readings this year. Jesus' story can become so familiar as to simply wash over us, so Matthew looks at some 'unexpected Advents' of Jesus to shake us awake to these surprising and joyful theophanies. We also welcome Ruth Bancewicz and her team from The Faraday Institute, who have collectively written two weeks of notes about God as creator. Each person contributes only one or two readings, but together they paint a picture of the wonder of creation and provide some fantastic ideas for how to engage with God through nature.

We are also pleased to welcome back contributors continuing their series from previous issues. Ashley Hibbard finishes off our journey through the Joseph cycle, as Joseph reunites with his brothers and then looks to the future. Steve Walton, who wrote on 1 Thessalonians in the previous issue, now completes the story by looking at 2 Thessalonians.

We also welcome back some other familiar faces. Stephen Finamore moves from Revelation to Romans as he explores the first four chapters of this dense book. Rosalee Velloso Ewell takes us on a tour of James, while Peter Hatton explores the difficulty of God's anger in Amos. As we enter Advent, David Spriggs introduces us to twin parables told by Jesus, and Henry Wansbrough brings us a week of notes on life after death. As we draw closer to Christmas, in addition to Matthew Knell's notes, Imogen Ball brings us to Christmas Day through an interesting exploration of the hymn 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel'. We end the year in the company of Kate Bruce, who challenges us to think about nurturing, protecting and forming potential in children.

We hope you enjoy reading and engaging with this issue as much as we enjoyed putting it together. Our prayer is always that these notes and reflections would draw you closer to God.

**Rachel Tranter and Olivia Warburton**

## 2 Thessalonians



Steve Walton

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy had planted the church in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–10) but were forced to leave the city after a short time (perhaps something over three weeks, Acts 17:2). Their first letter included teaching about the Lord's return, something they hadn't been able to teach fully about during their short visit (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:13—5:11), as well as mentioning the persecution the new believers faced (1 Thessalonians 2:14–16). The second letter is written not long after the first, maybe as little as a few weeks, because the situation has deteriorated. The church faces three major challenges which this letter addresses – look for these as we read the letter together.

First, the suffering and persecution has stepped up a gear, and probably caused some of the believers to wobble in their faithfulness to Jesus. The missionaries stress the deliverance which will come to believers at the Lord's return and the judgement which their opponents will face, and they encourage them to focus on Jesus as the source of their hope (1:4–12; 2:16–17; 3:3–4).

Second, there are misunderstandings about the day of the Lord's return, with some thinking that day has already arrived (2:2). Some may have misunderstood the first letter's teaching on that theme, and/or other teachers may have introduced strange ideas into the church. The team write to clarify the situation (2:1–15).

Third, a group within the church are being disruptive and refusing to work (3:6–15). They are depending on others' goodwill and resources to live, and this is causing tensions within the church. The missionary trio write their toughest words in responding to this issue.

It's worth reading the whole letter at a sitting as you start, to get an overview – that should take you 10–15 minutes. Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are taken from the NRSV.

# 1 Greetings, grace and peace

## 2 Thessalonians 1:1–2

As usual in ancient letters, we begin with the senders – Paul, Silvanus (sometimes called Silas) and Timothy – and the recipients – the church of the Thessalonians. Paul’s team planted the church in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–10) and have written earlier the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians. They are writing again in very similar terms to the opening of their previous letter (1 Thessalonians 1:1), which implies that they are still together. That places this letter soon after the first one, perhaps by only a matter of weeks. Much of this letter will sound familiar to readers of the first letter: it seems issues among the Christians in the city which the missionaries wrote about in the previous letter have developed – not to say gone pear-shaped – and now need further response.

Two things are striking as small differences from the greeting in 1 Thessalonians. First, they write of ‘God *our* Father’ (v. 1), whereas the previous letter spoke of ‘God *the* Father’. Like the previous letter, this one is full of family language for the Christians (e.g. ‘brothers and sisters’, 1:3), and thus ‘our’ stresses that God has drawn them into his family through the Lord Jesus – and in that way they are different from other groups which used family language about each other, such as the Greek trade associations. The primary relationship they have is that they are now located *in* God and the Lord Jesus. That’s crucial in their present situation, where they are suffering for their faith – understanding that they are safe in God’s hands and belong to Jesus together is vital.

Second, the senders specify the source of the grace and peace they pray for as the same God (this time, *the* Father) and the Lord Jesus Messiah (v. 2). As often in other Pauline letters, the opening hints at themes which will return during the letter. The generosity of God – his grace – is the source of ‘eternal encouragement and good hope’ (2:16). God’s generous love means the believers can face the challenges of their time, including suffering and death, with confidence. The peace of God is relevant amid persecution, too. It will keep them stable when their circumstances might make them wobble in their faith, and so the closing of the letter returns to this theme by praying again that the Lord, who is the source and meaning of peace, will give them peace (3:17).

## 2 Thanksgiving in trials

### 2 Thessalonians 1:3–4

It's easy to think of the Thessalonian Christians feeling discouraged in the persecution they were facing (v. 4). They faced opposition, which probably included social isolation and exclusion, verbal harassment and attacks, and maybe physical abuse. This was true when the missionaries sent their first letter (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 3:2–5), and Timothy's report had reassured them that the believers were standing firm in their faith (1 Thessalonians 3:6–8). By the time of this second letter, things have certainly not improved, and the believers would have felt a strong sense of social dishonour in their culture.

It is striking, therefore, that Paul's team are thankful for these relatively new Christians, and even boast about them to other churches. The team feel obligated to give thanks (v. 3), and saying that would prompt the Thessalonian believers to recognise that they were obligated to be thankful to God too.

In giving thanks to God for the believers, the missionaries bring encouragement as they lift the eyes of the church to God. They are thankful for two main things: the growth of their faithfulness to Christ, and the growth of their love for one another (v. 3). 'Faith' here is not simply an inner attitude of trust, but primarily active faithfulness or loyalty to Christ – 'steadfastness and faith' (v. 4) means 'steadfastness in faith'. They are hanging on in there, continuing to trust Jesus and to live for him amid suffering.

Not only that, but the evidence is visible in their love for one another. This is a committed mutual love of the whole community; the authors pile up phrases to show this: 'the love of *every one of you for one another*'. Churches can disintegrate into cliques at times, but not in Thessalonica at this time. External pressure brought them together in mutual encouragement and love. This love needed to be deeply practical, offering hospitality, sharing food and providing work for each other, because others in the city were turning their backs on the believers.

So, when Paul's team boasts about the Thessalonian believers, it's concerning their persistent faithfulness amid suffering. These Christians were models of following Jesus, from whom others could learn and take encouragement (see 1 Thessalonians 1:6–8). Suffering for Christ is not easy – but when other Christians learn that believers are staying faithful in persecution, it's a great encouragement.



### 3 Judgement for good or ill

#### 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10

The Thessalonian Christians face tough times in suffering for their faith in Jesus (v. 5), and the writers address this issue directly. The team's response is rooted in who God is and how God acts: the God whom the believers know in Jesus Christ is just and acts rightly. This has consequences for both the believers and their persecutors, which they state briefly in verses 6–7a and then fill out in verses 7b–10.

When we hear 'judgement', we tend to hear it negatively, focusing on the condemnation and punishment of those found guilty. However, judgement has two sides: one party is found innocent and goes free, and the other party is found guilty and faces punishment. When the writers mention 'the righteous judgement of God' (v. 5), they are talking about both sides of the judgement coin.

The believers can be confident that their suffering is not the act of a capricious God who doesn't really love them. Rather, their persecution is time-limited and can have positive outcomes. The time limit is the return of Jesus (vv. 7, 10), and on that great day they will experience 'relief' (v. 7) – their suffering will be over – and they will be swept up into marvelling at Christ as they meet him face to face (v. 10). The authors hammer the point home: 'This includes you' (v. 10, NIV) because the Thessalonians believed the missionaries' testimony about Jesus. Knowing this helps make their suffering bearable, as well as helping them to understand that their suffering is training, preparing them for God's kingdom by shaping them into the people Jesus is making them to be (v. 5).

Their opponents will face the other side of God's judgement, which the missionaries characterise as eternal separation from the Lord (v. 9, echoing Isaiah 2:10). The great tragedy for people who reject ('do not obey') the gospel of Jesus and thus do not know God (v. 8) is that God lets them go and does not force them to respond. If you hate God and his people here and now, then why would you want to spend eternity with them? Incredibly sadly, such people miss out on all that makes people most human, living with God and his people. This motivates Paul and his team to announce the gospel as widely as possible while they can.

## 4 Praying in pain

### 2 Thessalonians 1:11–12

As I write, Afghanistan has been taken over by the Taliban, and there are stories that they are making threats to underground Christian groups in the country. Christians elsewhere are rightly being called to pray for our brothers and sisters in that land: but how should we pray in the face of such a threat? We learn about praying for suffering believers from these verses, as Paul's team turn their encouragement (vv. 5–10) into prayer. It's worth noticing what they *don't* pray for as well as what they do pray for.

My tendency, as a westerner, is to think that suffering is a bad thing – in wealthier countries, we have healthcare systems designed to avoid pain and suffering. For us as Christians, that can easily become the expectation that God will make our lives better and easier, that the Lord will remove pain from us. It's striking, then, that this is not what the missionaries pray for the Thessalonians – they don't ask God to deliver them from the suffering they're experiencing. Indeed, the writers consider suffering to be a part of the normal Christian life: remember how verses 3–5 show that suffering generates perseverance and faith.

Instead, the missionaries' prayer is twofold, linking back to the encouragement of verses 5–10. First, they pray that God will enable them to live in a way which matches up to God's call on their lives, that their profession of faith and lifestyle may be in tune. Second, they pray that God will empower them to live out their desires for goodness and cause it to grow (notice the fruit image). They're praying for the believers *in* the situation of pain and suffering, not asking for them to be removed from that situation. Why? Because that's how Jesus will be glorified, that's how his reputation will sparkle among their fellow citizens. Persistent faith in suffering has that kind of quality and effect on others around. Not only that, but Jesus' glory will be reflected back to them, as they persist in their faith through to the end of all things, when they will meet the Lord face to face (see vv. 7, 10). Here's a great way to pray for Christians who suffer for their faith today.

## 5 A strange letter and a reply

### 2 Thessalonians 2:1–6

The second coming of Jesus to judge and transform the world was central to the initial evangelism of Thessalonica (see 1 Thessalonians 1:10). That teaching led to questions which the missionary team answered in their first letter (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11). They now return to this theme (v. 1), which suggests that further questions and issues has arisen in the church. Specifically, the believers are concerned about a letter claiming Paul's authority to tell them that the day of the Lord has already arrived – the age to come is already in progress (v. 2). To our ears, this sounds strange, for we think of the Lord's coming as the time when everyone will see him and will bow to Jesus as Lord. However, these relatively new Christians aren't sufficiently established to know this for sure, and thus easily misled. They may have been told, worryingly, that their suffering is part of the judgement which the day of the Lord brought, or they may have misunderstood the teaching in the previous letter.

There's plenty to puzzle over in this section, but the central thing to notice is that the writers are saying clearly that there are more events to come before the great day of the Lord, just as they said in their first letter. That day definitely isn't here in its fullness yet. The missionaries are not saying anything they haven't already said (v. 5). They're not laying out a timetable of those events, but they are saying that things will get worse, not better, before the day comes.

There will be a 'lawless one' (v. 3) who will seek worship for himself (v. 4), and Paul has warned them about this (v. 5). Much Christian ink has been spilled in trying to guess this person's identity: perhaps he's an archetypal figure who can be seen in many individuals down the ages who have sought worship and ultimate allegiance for themselves in place of the true God (v. 4). For the Thessalonians, the Roman emperor demanded the loyalty and worship which the missionaries taught belonged to Jesus alone. The key point the writers stress is that this 'lawless one' will not triumph: he is 'destined for destruction' (v. 3). He's being restrained (v. 6), perhaps by the archangel Michael, who holds back evil and protects God's people in Daniel 10–12. They write to comfort and encourage, not to invite speculation – the Thessalonian Christians truly are safe in Jesus' hands.

## 6 Encouragement in tough times

### 2 Thessalonians 2:7-12

It's important to keep the senders' aim in focus here: they write to encourage the Thessalonians amid suffering for their faith. They aren't offering them a timetable of events to come at the end of all things. They're reminding the believers of things they have already taught them (v. 5) – and that can leave us puzzled, since we didn't hear that teaching. That's why we need to give attention as readers to the main point the writers are making.

The team remind the Thessalonian Christians that things are already difficult (v. 7), but events haven't yet reached their climax (v. 8). When that climax comes, Jesus will triumph and those who reject him will face judgement and loss (vv. 8-12). How does this teaching support and encourage the believers in tough times?

First, it helps them to see that, although things are bad, they could be much worse, because the restrainer holds back the full power of the 'lawless one' (vv. 6-7). They aren't facing the full force of evil because God, through this restrainer, is holding evil back, and for that they can be thankful.

Second, they can look forward with hope to the coming of Jesus, for he will literally blow the 'lawless one' away (v. 8). The image comes from Isaiah, where the Lord will judge justly for the needy and 'with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked' (11:4; see also 30:33). There's no battle here – there is no threat that Jesus will lose, or even be under pressure, in bringing justice and judgement. The believers can rejoice and can look their present experience of suffering in the eye without fear, for they can be confident of their ultimate vindication and safety (see also 1:1:6-10).

Third, the missionaries remind the believers that what they believe is the truth which brings them salvation (vv. 10, 12). To reject that good news is to reject life and to give in to wickedness and live a lie (v. 9). Sin is an addiction: the more you get into it, the more you want to get into it – remember the way that Paul three times speaks of God giving sinful people up to go their own way (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). *But that isn't the way the believers' lives are orientated* – that's the key point. The readers can take comfort from their safety in Christ.

## Guidelines

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The Thessalonian believers are having a hard time maintaining their faithfulness to Jesus because of opposition and disinformation. The opposition probably means that they find it hard to get work, lose customers from their shops and businesses, suffer social ostracism and perhaps are physically attacked. In the history of the church, persecution is not unusual – it is the normal situation for many believers today, who experience many of the same deprivations as the Thessalonians, plus being excluded from education which could help them out of poverty and struggle.

The striking thing with such believers is how often they are remarkably joyful and vibrant in their faith. They experience the Lord's grace and peace. They look forward to the day of Jesus' return when he will put the universe to rights. That's not to romanticise persecution at all: these Christians really do suffer, sometimes grievously, but they face it with the Lord standing by them. Polycarp, a second-century bishop of Smyrna, was put to death because he refused to deny his faith. He said to the magistrate, 'For eighty-six years I have been [Christ's] servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?' (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9:3). He was so grateful to Jesus that he considered it no loss to die.

It's easy for us who live in comfortable places, where our faith is not a direct cause of persecution, to slip into mediocrity in our Christian lives. We can easily forget that this world is not as God wishes, that the day will come when the Lord Jesus judges everyone, and that we're called to live here as witnesses to Jesus. The letter of 2 Thessalonians calls us to reflect and to grasp that our Lord and Saviour is the most important one in the universe – he deserves our total allegiance.



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This issue of **Guidelines** has been commissioned by **Helen Paynter**, director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence at Bristol Baptist College, and is edited by **Rachel Tranter**, Editorial Manager at BRF, and **Olivia Warburton**, Head of Content Creation at BRF.

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